

Looking through the window of controversy

As editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*, Richard Horton has gained a worldwide reputation for his forthright views and willingness to face controversy. Confirmation of his eminence has just been received with his greatest achievement to date: being interviewed by *Medical Student!*



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IF there's one thing Richard Horton, Editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*, is known for, it's that he isn't afraid to speak his mind. Googling "Richard Horton outspoken" brings over 59,000 results, *The Telegraph* calls him "a firebrand" and *The Independent* says he is "the most controversial editor *The Lancet* has ever had". It's also fair to say that his willingness to express his opinions divides opinions: while he's seen as a hero to many for speaking out on issues such as the Iraq war, Africa and vested interests in medicine, he's also garnered more than his fair share of criticism: the Royal Society have chastised him personally on a number of occasions, one time saying his editorials "would look more at home on the leader page of a red-top tabloid than in a scholarly journal" while Christopher Hitchens, columnist for *Vanity Fair* and the *Wall Street Journal*, has described him as a "full-throated Islamist-leftist." These comments are tame compared to some of the sentiments expressed in the pro-war blogosphere.

With all this in mind I'd already formed an opinion of what he'd be like as I waited to meet him: part George Galloway, part Nash Castor, the raucous talk show host on the Simpsons ("after this commercial break, I will be talking even louder! DON'T MISS IT!") and maybe a little Jeremy Clarkson thrown in for good measure. Imagine my surprise on being greeted by an unassuming man, softly spoken, polite, with impeccable manners. Not the Citizen Smith clone I was expecting at all. Any thoughts that he might be meek however were blown out of the water within roughly thirty seconds as he started speaking of his "arch-nemesis, the BMA" before I'd even had the chance to sit down



and turn the Dictaphone on!

Horton was looking to speak his mind from a young age. Rejecting offers from London medical schools where he feared he'd "drown in medicine"; he went to Birmingham, attracted by the opportunities a campus university gave him to mix with non-medics. Yet on arrival he was disappointed to find students had no interest in politics: "everyone was so lazy and they couldn't care less: there was no marching, there was nothing at all, it was really apolitical." After six years at medical school Horton moved to the Royal Free to take up an academic post before moving onto *The Lancet* but it was not through his work, rather the lack of it. Stuck in "a second rate department" he found the fact that "nobody did a stroke of work" tedious and on seeing an advert for a job at *The Lancet*, he jumped at the chance: "I always loved writing, I always loved politics and I always loved debate and argument so when I saw this job come up in I thought I'd love to try it: it's medical journalism and I need to get this out of my system. Maybe I'll hate it and have to go back to academic medicine but I loved it."

By 1995 he was appointed editor-in-chief, and at just 33, the youngest in the journal's history. His vision for what *The Lancet* should be doing was clear in his mind: "I realised

that a medical journal can be a very powerful, and sometimes dangerous, tool for good. It can be a conduit for ideas and a forum for discussion that can change the way people think. We want to be very political, we want to bring together great scientists and focus on important issues to come up with solutions instead of just publishing other people's work. We have to be more engaged in society." And despite no longer being a scruffy student bunking tutorials ("I don't think, apart from the first day or two, I ever went to dissection") his passion for activism is central to this and shows no signs of abating: he lights up at the mention of Medsin ("absolutely fantastic, great campaigning that we need more of") and lauds the work of RemedyUK, seeing it as an opportunity to create a new doctors' movement: "I think doctors are an immensely powerful group, or could be, but we mostly worry about when we are going to get our BMW and whether we're going to get merit awards or whatever they're called these days. We're a very self-indulgent group so what RemedyUK did was tremendous. It was the one issue that united people across medicine like nothing before and I can tell you the Royal Colleges were scared stiff of it. These medical leaders, they're good people individually, but put them into a political process

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comparison to the discussion that would follow his decision to publish two papers on the number of deaths in Iraq caused by the war. Christened *The Lancet studies* by the media, they calculated that over 600,000 people had died as a result of the war and brought both vigorous praise and condemnation. The figures have been used across the world to demonstrate the failings of the invasion of Iraq but infuriated pro-war commentators with one

health or clinical medicine that we should be campaigning for?"

Finally in the political environment he had relished since university, Horton was quick to make his mark and his work was soon making headlines. He angered the scientific community by publishing a groundbreaking paper which was the first to question the safety of genetically modified food, brandished the UK's oldest scientific group, the Royal Society "lazy, self-serving and parochial" and published the now notorious Wakefield MMR study which suggested a link between the vaccine and autism. But even the furore these events caused paled in

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prominent US journalist, Michael Fumento, saying that the report was further evidence that the "once-respectable" *Lancet* should be renamed "Al-Jazeera on the Thames." The frenzy the studies caused shocked even Horton: "I didn't anticipate the first paper which we did in 2003 would be quite so big and that paper was really trashed. I got a mass of hate mail from people but what was interesting was the second paper last year was a great paper and sailed through peer review and yes, as soon as it was published George Bush came out on to the Whitehouse lawn and said it was a piece of rubbish but the letters we got were very supportive."

Horton is quick to dismiss criticism that Iraq is not a topic for a medical journal, calling it "an absolutely central issue" because of the public health ramifications war entails. It is this belief that led him to begin a public campaign against the company that publishes *The Lancet*, Reed-Elsevier, when he discovered their involvement in running arms fairs. Previously animated in discussion but generally relaxed, Horton's demeanour changes on mention of the topic and he emits a nervous chuckle when discussing the issue: "I don't feel Reed-Elsevier can commit to the values of medicine when at the same times it's selling cluster bombs in Abu Dhabi as it was earlier this year or selling AK47s in the United States which it was doing this year. That to me is totally hypocritical; they don't agree. I cannot for the life of me understand that so there is a real problem there because I don't think you can be a health publisher and be in that business." He cheers up quickly however when asked if he'd considered leaving over the matter: "I think I might be sacked before I resign! It is something I've talked about with my wife, should we think about a plan B - should I leave and she go back to work full time and I do more childcare which wouldn't be such a bad thing! It's very hard, because I'm optimistic from the conversations I've had with Reed-Elsevier: I know they're beginning to change their minds I can see it when I meet them, I can hear it when they speak to me, I know they know it's not a smart place to be for them, so what's very important is we all keep the pressure up. So for me, my job is to help keep the pressure up in a polite, responsible way. I think they will change their minds. So now isn't the moment to go but maybe it will be in the future, I don't know."

And from that, conversation quickly switches to the "inhuman" MTAS system and the need for the "clueless" MMC team to be "swept out tomorrow". Principled but a pugilist, opinionated but ethical, I'm left with no doubt Horton's reputation for loving a scrap is much deserved. I'm also sure nobody would approve of this more than Thomas Wakley, the doctor and MP who created *The Lancet* in 1823 with the aim of fighting the nepotism and corruption he saw as endemic in medicine. The spirit of these founding principles lives on.



WIN! We have a year's free online subscription to *The Lancet* to giveaway to one lucky reader, all you have to do is answer the following question: Which medical school did Richard Horton attend? Email your answer to ej@medical-student.co.uk - the editor's decision is final.